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SUBJECT: NEW OIC SECRETARY GENERAL ON ISRAEL/PALESTINE, SUDAN, AND THE OIC

REF: JEDDAH 1603

Classified By: Consul-General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

1. (C) Summary and Comment: Elected on June 16 as the next Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) Secretary General (reftel), Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu met with poloff on July 12 to discuss his recent election, plans for the organization, and views on a range of topics. Well-known to the Consulate, Ihsanoglu will likely bring a more academic and less political approach to the OIC. Ihsanoglu's experience and fluent English should make him an accessible and reasonable interlocutor, but his views on Israel/Palestine and U.S. policy in the Middle East will ensure that he is a firm advocate of long-held OIC positions on these and other issues. End Summary and Comment.

2. (SBU) Meeting with poloff on July 12, Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the Director General of the Istanbul-based Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture (IRCICA, a subsidiary of the OIC), credited both Turkish diplomacy and his own qualifications for his recent appointment as the next OIC Secretary General. Following an initial impasse among three candidates (from Turkey, Malaysia, and Bangladesh) for the position (note: by tradition the position rotates between the Arab, African, and Asian groups within the OIC), Ihsanoglu was selected in the first-ever OIC "election" by 32 of the 56 voting members. Ihsanoglu told poloff that he sees this election, although the ballot was secret, as a particularly significant democratic development. Asked whether it should be seen as a precedent or a one-time incident, Ihsanoglu said that as the presiding Secretary General for the next appointment he hopes to ensure that this practice is institutionalized.

3. (C) Ihsanoglu remarked that the Istanbul OIC Meeting, like previous gatherings, was characterized by a consensus on the need for more democratic reform and civil society development among member states. Several speakers underlined the "image" problem faced by the Islamic world in light of continuing terrorist activities. Poloff suggested that these statements point to significant areas of common cause with the U.S. Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative. Ihsanoglu seized on the opening to lambaste the U.S. for what he called a "short-sighted, one-size-fits-all" approach to the region. While conceding that the U.S. has a credibility problem, poloff assured Ihsanoglu that we are keenly aware of the regional diversity and do not intend to "impose" our own democratic model on the region. Based only on the self-stated objectives of the OIC and its members, poloff reiterated that there should be substantial room for cooperation in this area.

4. (C) Returning to the subject of U.S. credibility in the region, Ihsanoglu agreed that much of the public criticism directed against the U.S. was unwarranted. Ihsanoglu conceded that U.S. interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo on behalf of local Muslim populations directly contradict charges of a U.S. "anti-Islamic" bias (Note: An expert on Bosnia, Ihsanoglu could not resist commenting that intervention had come late and that the Dayton Accords had created an unworkable situation for the Bosnian Muslims. End Note). Asked for his views on the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Sudan, Ihsanoglu openly dismissed OIC efforts and statements to date as inadequate and undertook to take a more aggressive approach on such humanitarian crises.

5. (C) Ihsanoglu pointed to the Israel/Palestinian issue as the principal cause for the lack of U.S. credibility in the region. Ihsanoglu remarked that as a teenager growing up in Cairo, despite official propaganda to the contrary, he remembered the U.S. as the "land of the free" and as an "unbiased arbitrator." This public image, he added ruefully, has been turned on its head over the last few decades. Ihsanoglu called on the U.S. to pressure Israel to abandon the "illegal" wall it is constructing, its settlements in the occupied territories, and its tactics of humiliation and violence. Poloff argued that the U.S. is prepared to urge both sides to reach an agreement, but that any settlement will depend on the leadership and political will of the parties. Ihsanoglu concurred when poloff noted that the absence of such leadership and any kind of democratic legitimacy on the Palestinian side are major obstacles to

peace. Ihsanoglu reminded poloff, however, that this issue led to the creation of the OIC and remains its "raison d'tre."

16. (C) Ihsanoglu told poloff that the hiring of more capable and experienced staff would be his highest priority as OIC Secretary General when he assumes office next year. Clearly

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dissatisfied with the caliber of the existing OIC staff, Ihsanoglu stressed the need for more "capable" personnel with "international (i.e., U.N.) experience." Although the four OIC Assistant Secretary Generals are appointed by the OIC members, Ihsanoglu believes that he will be in a position to make a positive difference at the middle and lower levels of the 150-strong OIC staff.

17. (SBU) Bio Notes:

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a Turkish national, was born in 1943 in Cairo, Egypt. Before assuming his current position as the Director General of the Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture (IRCICA) in 1980, Ihsanoglu was a professor of organic chemistry and has since continued his academic career as a professor of the history of science. As the Director General of IRCICA and the Secretary of the International Commission for the Preservation of Islamic Cultural Heritage, Ihsanoglu has organized and directed research projects on various aspects of Islamic culture and civilization and has also edited a number of publications and periodicals. He is fluent in Turkish, Arabic, and English and has a working knowledge of French and Persian. He is married with three sons.

Ihsanoglu has been a valuable Consulate contact for many years. He is urbane, intellectual, friendly, and approachable. While adept at developing and maintaining political contacts, Ihsanoglu's knowledge of foreign affairs and his personal manner and style are more academic than political.

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